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ABSTRACT

To determine which communication skills employers in business and industry perceive as important for employees, a questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of personnel directors in business and industry in the Greater Cincinnati metropolitan area. Of the questionnaires mailed, 89 were returned (29.3% response rate). Analysis of the responses indicated that communication skills judged as important for employees to possess included accurate listening, credibility, ability to organize ideas in an orderly way, a clear and distinct voice, personal confidence when speaking to others, sensitivity to others, correct grammar and pronunciation, ability to interpret a message to another person, persuasiveness, establishment of face-to-face contact with others, and ability to use the formal organizational channels of communication and to make decisions cooperatively with others. Communication skills rated as unimportant for employees included ability to use a special technical vocabulary, disclosure of personally relevant material, variety in vocal intonation, speech free from dialect, loud vocal volume, ability to interpret printed material by reading aloud, and ability to use parliamentary procedure. (GT)

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Speech Communication Instruction Based on Employers' Perceptions of the Importance of Selected Communication Skills for Employees on the Job

Abstract

Speech communication educators increasingly want to give students practical career related communication skills. To determine which communication skills employers in business and industry perceive as important a questionnaire was mailed to a random sample in the Greater Cincinnati area. Data was collected by Likert scales and ranking procedures. Means were computed and analyzed for significance using a t-test. Results were compared with results from other studies. Based on these results recommendations were made regarding the teaching of communication skills for career preparation of students.

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In recent years educators have placed increasing emphasis on meeting the actual needs of students. Speech communication educators have been no exception. As Scott points out, "It should be the responsibility of each instructor and department to ascertain the particular oral communication needs of students enrolled in the school and develop the course content to satisfy those needs."[1] For many students this means equipping them with communication competencies which are meaningful and helpful for functioning in business and industry. This is particularly true for community college and technical program students who typically enter the work force directly after two years of training. These students must have specific communication training for on the job performance as well as a varied liberal arts background.

Galvin,[2] Lampton,[3] Vogel,[4] and Wolvin and Wolvin[5] are among the speech communication educators who have tried to adapt college speech communication instruction to on the job career needs of students. For the most part, however, current college training in communication does not meet the demands or reflect the practices of business and industry, as studies by House,[6] Clark,[7] Rainey,[8] Belahov, et al.,[9] LeNoir,[10] and Hergenroeder[11] point out. The problem stems from not knowing exactly what communication competencies employers in business and industry require of their employees. Since employers set standards for job performance and for hiring, promotion, and firing (presumably on the basis of demonstrated competence), the perceptions

of employers regarding the relative importance of specific communication skills would be valuable information to speech communication instructors trying to meet the business communication needs of students. These needs cannot adequately be met until employers' requirements are known.

Several researchers have made recent attempts to help communication educators understand some of the practical communication requirements by employers in business and industry. Without any empirical data individual businessmen Haakenson[12] and Grogg[13] have offered their personal views. Weeks[14] analyzed job descriptions from the University of Illinois Office of Career Development to determine how frequently communication competencies were mentioned as required, or desirable qualifications. Hergenroeder[15] reports which communication skills business executives rate as most needed by midmanagement. She reports, too, some of the communication practices in Ohio community colleges. Unfortunately, her results cannot be accepted without question since she does not specify her sample or how she obtained her data. Clark[16] analyzed 100 questionnaires returned from a national sample of executives in business and government. Her purpose, however, was to determine the constituent factors of oral effectiveness and to identify situations involving oral means rather than to determine which oral (or written) communication skills were deemed important by representatives of business.

Belahov, et al.[17] asked executives in 250 of the

largest organizations in the United States private sector 16 questions regarding their expectations of a graduate business communication course. They asked only very general questions such as, "Do communication skills count for anything when you hire an employee?" and "What skills do you think an executive should have in communications that you feel do not generally come from a course in business communication?" Responses were reported as percentages of the sample answering "yes" or "no" to the first question or "nonverbal," "oral," or "written" to the second. While such data and answers to such questions give us some insight, they do not tell us much at all in specific terms about the relative importance of specific skills on the job.

In another study Heugli and Tschirgi[18] used an open ended questionnaire method to survey 101 recent business engineering graduates to answer their research question whether college business communication courses were properly preparing graduates for adequate entry level job performance. They report a rank order of general communication abilities which list "conferences with boss" as most frequently used by the sample. This rank order was based on responses whether a particular ability was reportedly used "very often" or "occasionally." Measurement by these two categories alone hardly gives a complete understanding of the importance or even the frequency of these abilities. Nor do we know what specific communication skills are required in "conferences with boss." Indeed Heugli and Tschirgi don't help us answer that question at all. What they call communication skills

(conferences, proposal writing) are really contexts, formats or modes of delivery.

Rainey[19] compared the reports of 105 business communication teachers to the reports of 50 executives of manufacturing firms regarding the importance to executives of selected general types of communication ability. Like those reported by Hegli and Tschirgi, the communication skills Rainey considered are general communication abilities such as "proposal writing" and "ability to write letters."

Witty's[20] study of the communication skills needed by junior college graduates is certainly helpful. His finding that college freshmen, businessmen, and college professors agree that interpersonal skills are more needed than "traditional" skills is enlightening. This study, however, hardly tells us with any finality which basic skills employers consider important. His businessman sample is too small to make any reliable generalizations from it.

While these studies have tried to determine which basic communication skills employers require, their results are incomplete or inadequate in three ways: (1) In studies where employers requirements were central no sample size was larger than 50;[21] (2) The "skills" reported were not basic communication skills, but more general formats or modes of delivery; (3) None of the studies employes more than minimal statistical treatment in the form of percentages. No study reports the results of a significance test.

The present study fills these gaps in the extant research on the subject. This study has two purposes:

1. to determine which speech communication skills employers in business and industry perceive as important for employees to possess on the job; and
2. to make several recommendations regarding the college speech communication curriculum in light of the results.

Method

To determine which communication skills employers rate as important for employees a survey questionnaire was mailed to a random sample of "personnel directors" in business and industry in the Greater Cincinnati metropolitan area. The personnel director was selected to receive the questionnaire because it was believed that this person in the organization would be in the best position to know what skills the organization was seeking in the employees it hired, or would have access to such information. The sample was drawn from the Greater Cincinnati Business and Industry Directory[22] which lists approximately 4100 local firms. A computer generated list of random numbers from 1 to 300 was used to select 300 businesses and industries to receive the questionnaire. This sample of employers drawn from the Cincinnati population may be considered representative of the national population regarding type and size of the

employing firm. Of the 50 top national retailing firms[23] 16 have major business units in Cincinnati, and of these 3 have their home offices there. Of the top 50 industrial firms[24] 23 have major units in Cincinnati. Of these 3 appeared in the random sample drawn for this study.

The questionnaire was printed on both sides of one legal size sheet. It consisted of four sections. Section One presented a list of 31 speech communication skills which employers were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert type scale with 5 indicating that the skill was "very important" on the job and 1 indicating that the skill was "very unimportant." These 31 skills can be seen in Table 2.

Section Two asked employers to rank in order of importance seven common modes of speech communication: informing, persuading, discussing, conversing, entertaining, refuting and debating. Section Three was included to replicate part of the work done by Wasylik, et al.[25] This section asked employers to rank order interviewing, public speaking, group discussion, listening, writing, reading, and nonverbal communication in order of importance on the job. The final section of the Questionnaire solicited background data and asked respondents to mention any important communication skills inadvertently omitted from the survey instrument.

Sample means for each of the 31 communication skills in Section One were computed. A t-test comparing individual

item means to the grand mean for all 31 items determined which item means were significant. Composite rank orders for items in Sections Two and Three were determined by ranking sample means for each item.

Results and Discussion

Of the 300 questionnaires mailed out, 89 were returned. This represents a return rate of 29.3%. The 31 Likert scales in all 89 questionnaires returned were usable and included in the analysis. However, Sections Two and Three of 14 of the questionnaires had incomplete or confused data and were eliminated from the study, leaving $n = 75$ cases for the rank order analyses. Perhaps the instructions, "Rank order these speech communication activities of a speaker in terms of how important it is that your employees be skilled in each (1--most important; 7--least important)" were not clear to these 14 respondents. Background data for 2 respondents was missing.

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of respondents by size and type of firms they represent. The composition of the respondents sets the limit of the generalizability of the results. Employers from manufacturing or service for profit firms made up 90.4% of the sample. In size 81.6% of respondents represent companies with fewer than 250 employees, and over half (52.8%) of the respondents represent manufacturing or service for profit firms with less than 100 employees. These results indicate

that the conclusions of the study should be generalized more to smaller than to larger firms in business for profit. These limits should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of the study.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 shows the means and significance of t-values of each of the 31 communication skills measured by the Likert scales. The skills have been rank ordered by means to suggest an order of perceived importance. Mean scores are generally high. Nine (9) out of the 31 means are greater than 4 = important, and 22 of the means are greater than 3.5 = somewhat important. These high means suggest that the respondents tend to rate communication skills in general as important on the job. No mean score is less than 2 = unimportant. No communication skill was viewed generally as very unimportant.

Insert Table 2 about here

As judged by the employers surveyed, accurate listening credibility, organizing ideas orderly, a clear and distinct voice, personal confidence when speaking to others, sensitivity to others, correct grammar, interpreting a message to another person, persuasiveness, correct

pronunciation, face to face contact between speaker and listener, skillful use of the formal channels of communication in the organization, and making decisions cooperatively with others are important communication skills for employees to possess on the job. Employers rated the ability to use a special technical vocabulary, discovering new material to communicate, disclosure of personally relevant material, variety in vocal intonation, speech free of dialect, a loud vocal volume, interpreting printed material by reading aloud and ability to use parliamentary procedure as unimportant communication skills for employees on the job. The t scores for the remaining items were not significant. Several of the items with significant t scores deserve further discussion.

Receiver Skills

The significant importance ratings given to accurate listening, sensitivity to others, and interpreting a message to another person show the concern employers have that employees be tuned to the reception of messages. The results do not suggest whether employers are more concerned with horizontal or vertical listening in the organizational hierarchy, but certainly accurate listening is necessary for the understanding of instructions to perform an assigned job. The importance of this listening is confirmed by Huegli's and Tschirgi's discovery that "listening to the boss' ideas and suggestions" ranked third in frequency of use on the job by recent business engineering graduates.[26]

Sensitivity to others, however, implies not only accurate listening for instructions, but a warm human regard for others and an ability to "get along well" with fellow workers. Interpreting a message to another person requires accurate listening to assure that the message has been understood before it can be fairly interpreted to another individual.

Influence and Trust

Credibility and persuasiveness are both rated as important. The high rating for one confirms the high rating for the other. Apparently employers believe that employees should be able to influence others. In common parlance, however, credibility (more so than persuasiveness) carries an ethical connotation. The credible speaker is not only effective in influencing others, but also trustworthy and reliable. The high rating ($\bar{x}$ = 4.548, second only to listening) given to credibility suggests that employers value this ethical characteristic of personal trust in employees. While persuasiveness could imply the "hard sell" approach often attributed to profit motivated businesses, the high rating given credibility tends to belie the frequently heard complaint that human relations in business are cold hearted and manipulative. Employers apparently want employees whom they can believe and trust as well as who are effective persuaders.

Basic Skills

While a loud vocal volume, variety in vocal intonation, and speech free of dialect are considered unimportant by employers, other basic skills are viewed as important. A clear and distinct voice, correct grammar, and correct pronunciation are rated as important. The perceived importance of correct grammar echoes the recommendation by Steve Baldwin, a personnel manager for American Natural Gas Service Company in Detroit, Michigan.[27] He strongly encouraged speech educators attending the 1977 Central States Speech Association Convention to mark student papers for grammatical errors. The perceived importance of correct grammar is consistent also with Hergenroeder's[28] findings that grammar and other mechanics are a serious communication weakness of mid-management personnel reported by executives. To accurately interpret this result, of course, what exactly employers mean by grammar must be understood. It is likely that they, like other non-professional grammarians, have a loosely defined notion of grammar including spelling, punctuation and other mechanics of writing as well as grammar. Employers probably don't care whether employees can recite the rules of case, number, mood and voice. They certainly do require that employees can put together a correct sentence.

Other results regarding basic skills are somewhat confounding. It is difficult to reconcile the perceived importance of speech free of dialect. An obvious explanation is

that employers recognize individual and group dialects as acceptable and correct speaking. Less confusing but still problematical is the perceived importance of a clear and distinct voice compared to the perceived unimportance of a loud vocal volume. To be sure, loud volume is not identical to adequate volume, and loud volume is only one of several requisites for a clear and distinct voice. Perhaps respondents would have answered differently if they had been asked to rate "adequate volume" rather than "a loud vocal volume."

Interpersonal Skills

The interpersonal skills valued by employers are face to face contact between speaker and listener, sensitivity to others, and the ability to work cooperatively with others. These results support the report by Witty's[29] sample that interpersonal skills are more needed by junior college freshmen than are traditional speech skills such as public speaking. However, disclosure of personally relevant material, an interpersonal skill much taught currently, was not perceived to be important by employers. Galvin's[30] suggestion that issues of self disclosure be included in a career communication curriculum is not supported by the employers surveyed in the present study.

Organizational Skills

Organizing ideas orderly is perceived as important. In fact it ranks third behind only listening and credibility.

This should not be surprising in light of Clark's[31] discovery that "good organization" was most frequently mentioned by her sample as contributing to general communication effectiveness and Hergenroeder's[32] report that executives perceive outlining and organizing ability as the major English skill weakness of mid-management personnel. Organization, however, is usually viewed as a public speaking skill rather than an interpersonal skill, but public speaking is rated as the least important communication mode. (See results in the following section.) Apparently business and industry respondents view organizational skills important apart from their function in public speaking.

Other Skills

One surprising result is the perceived unimportance of ability to use a special technical vocabulary. This result also tends to undermine Galvin's[33] suggestion to consider the importance of technical terms in a career communication curriculum. Interpreting printed material by reading aloud and ability to use parliamentary procedure were both perceived as unimportant.

Table 3 shows the mean scores and rank order of means for the seven modes of communication respondents were asked to rank order in Section Two of the questionnaire: 54.7% of the respondents ranked "informing" first, and 72% ranked it first or second. "Discussion" was ranked first, second or third by 85.3% of the respondents. "Persuading" was ranked

fourth by the largest percentage for that item (37.3%), but enough respondents ranked "persuading" first (12%), second (20%), or third (20%) to raise that item's overall composite rank to third. Entertaining was clearly ranked least important with 49.3% of the respondents ranking it seventh and 70.6% ranking it sixth or seventh. Since mean differences vary so widely, no clear conclusions can be drawn about an absolute rank ordering of these items. For this reason items are discussed only in general categories. Percentages of respondents assigning each skill to each rank are reported to give a more sophisticated view of the range of ratings for each item. Fine distinctions between ranks cannot be justified by this data, but general conclusions can be made whether an item ranks in the upper half or lower half of the ranking. The seven items seem to fall into two broad categories of importance. Informing, discussing, persuading and conversing rank in the "more important" category while debating, refuting and entertaining fall into the "less important" group. The mean difference between item 4, conversing, and item 5, debating (m=2.053) is greater than the mean difference range among either the four highest ranking items (m=1.253) or the three lowest ranking items (m=.773). This suggests that respondents perceive more difference regarding importance between informing, discussing, persuading, and conversing as a group and debating, refuting, and entertaining as a group than they do among individual items in either group.

Insert Table 3 about here

Results from Section Three of the questionnare are shown in Table 4 together with comparable results by Wasylik, et al.[34] whose study this section was designed to replicate. In connection with their study of in house communication training Wasylik, et al. asked a random sampling of Pittsburg industries to rank order seven general communication skills. A Spearman correlation of rank orders $r = .80$ indicates that the Pittsburg sample Wasylik surveyed and the Cincinnati sample surveyed in the present study essentially agree on the order of importance of these communication skills. Such a high correlation tends as well to give reliability to the results. Two independent samples have responded remarkably similarly. Clearly "listening" is ranked first, followed by "writing." Both appear to be important communication skills on the job in business and industry.

Non-verbal communication and public speaking were ranked by both samples of respondents as least important of those communication skills listed. While both samples ranked reading, group discussion and interviewing as third, fourth and fifth respectively, the two samples disagree on the order. The difference, however, may not be significant, and no sure interpretation can be made.

Insert Table 4 about here

The fourth section of the questionnaire asked respondents, "What have we missed? What communication competencies have we not included here which you consider particularly important for your employees?" Twenty respondents answered this question. Four of these twenty pointed out that job level was not specified in the questionnaire. As one respondent said, "Recognize different skill levels required for different types of work. The answers would vary tremendously. Consider the answers for a salesman vs. a janitor, etc."

Several of the respondents in this section reiterated the concern for basic skills. One respondent complained, "We feel that reading, spelling and understandable speech habits with good grammar are a necessity. They are all hard to find today among both high school and college graduates." The importance of interpersonal skills was again shown in comments such as, "Projecting interest and warmth," "Treating all clientele with dignity and courtesy," "social communications skills," and "negotiating." Two comments in this section show concern for organizational abilities: "Preparation and analysis of what is to be communicated," and "ability to maintain continuity of thoughts in conversation or communicating with others."

Other helpful comments in this section were, "Effective use of visual aids to prove a point or further illustrate a point," "Documentation of events (recording an activity and what transpired)," and "I have heard all the 'you knows' I want to hear!"

Conclusions and Recommendations

The speech communication educator who wishes to prepare students for work in business and industry will design curricula, courses, course units, and individual assignments to give students the communication skills actually required by employers. The results of the present study (together with other studies reviewed) indicate what these requirements are. The following conclusions and recommendations come out of the results of this study.

1. Listening and other interpersonal skills are very important. Listening skills, particularly, should be stressed in a student's communication training. All college courses in communication ideally should be teaching listening, but it may be best taught in a public speaking, discussion, or experientially based interpersonal communication course. Listening is given such a high rating by employers that perhaps a college speech curriculum should include a special course in listening.

2. Basic communication skills must be emphasized in the communication training for a career in business and industry. Employers want college graduates who can pronounce correctly with a clear and distinct voice and who use correct grammar. Courses in the speech communication curriculum which teach these basic skills have traditionally been public speaking, voice and articulation, and performance courses such as

oral interpretation and acting. While grammar is usually considered the provence of the English teacher, perhaps the speech teacher should attend more closely to instruction in oral style. Few college Freshman English programs teach grammar qua grammar. Most grammar instruction is done indirectly as an adjunct to a writing or speaking course. A "reason" often heard in the past decade for deemphasizing grammar instruction has been that grammar is merely an academic exercise, not a relevant tool for performance in the "real world." The importance given to correct grammar by employers should challenge English and Speech instructors to place special emphasis on instruction in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics of writing.

3. Skills in organization and orderly thinking are highly valued by employers. Speech communication instructors should continue to stress to students the requirements of organization and orderly thinking. Speech courses such as public speaking, debate and argumentation and discussion hopefully teach these skills. Although not in the speech curriculum English composition and logic courses should continue to receive the endorsement of speech communication instructors.

4. Some forensic and theatrical skills apparently do not directly meet the job related communication needs of students planning to enter business and industry. The perceived unimportance of interpreting printed material by

reading aloud and the ability to use parliamentary procedure and the low ranking given Refuting Others, Debating with Others, and Entertaining Others leads to this conclusion. While courses in oral interpretation, theatre, debate, and parliamentary procedure certainly have educational value for students, these courses are not likely to give students the skills deemed important by employers in business and industry.

Footnotes

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[21]Rainey, 1972.

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[23]Fortune Magazine, May 1972, p. 216.

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[26]Huegli and Tschirgi, 1974.

[27]Steve Baldwin, speech delivered at Central States Speech Association Convention, Detroit, Michigan, April, 1977.

[28]Hergenroeder, 1976.

[29]Witty, 1972.

[30]Galvin, 1974.

[31]Clark, 1968.

[32]Hergenroeder, 1976.

[33]Galvin, 1974.

[34]Wasylik, et al., 1976.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Responding Institutions
By Size and Type

Type	Size 0-100	101-250	251-500	1000 or More	Type Totals
Manufacturing	19 21.8%	5 5.7%	4 4.6%	1 1.1%	29 33.3%
Service-- Profit	27 31.0%	7 8.0%	2 2.3%	5 5.7%	41 47.1%
Service-- Nonprofit	2 2.3%	1 1.1%	0 0.0%	1 1.1%	4 4.6%
Other	4 4.6%	6 6.9%	2 2.3%	1 1.1%	13 14.9%
Size Totals	52 59.8%	19 21.8%	8 9.2%	8 9.2%	

Communication Skill	Mean	t-value	p≤.001
Accurate listening	4.655	-14.99	*
Credibility	4.548	-12.87	*
Organizing ideas clearly	4.440	-11.13	*
A clear and distinct voice	4.345	-11.66	*
Personal confidence when speaking to others	4.321	-10.83	*
Sensitivity to others	4.214	- 6.95	*
Correct grammar	4.036	- 5.20	*
Interpreting a message to another person	4.036	- 5.29	*
Persuasiveness	4.012	- 4.65	*
Correct pronunciation	3.940	- 4.19	*
Face to face contact between speaker and listener	3.917	- 3.63	*
Skillful use of the formal channels of communication in the organization	3.917	- 3.86	*
Making decisions cooperatively with others	3.905	- 3.39	*
Effective management of conflict	3.869	- 2.85	
Group leadership skills	3.702	- .98	
Skillful use of the informal channels of communication in the organization	3.702	- 1.03	
Legible handwriting	3.690	- .77	
Assertiveness	3.655	- .43	
Effective communication with someone from a different cultural background	3.655	- .37	
Nonverbal expressiveness	3.631	- .12	
Interviewing	3.512	1.16	
A variety in vocabulary	3.500	1.72	
Using language free of slang	3.321	2.69	
Ability to use a special technical vocabulary	3.107	5.10	*
Discovering new material to communicate	2.976	7.87	*
Disclosure of personally relevant material	2.952	7.87	*
Variety in vocal intonation	2.905	7.51	*
Speech free of dialect	2.714	9.68	*
A loud vocal volume	2.488	11.43	*
Interpreting printed material by reading aloud	2.321	12.14	*
Ability to use parliamentary procedure	2.214	14.50	*

5--very important; 4--important; 3--somewhat important; 2--unimportant; 1--very unimportant

Table 3

Rank Ordering of Communication Skills

Rank Order of Means	Communication Skill	Mean	Percentage of Respondents Assigning Each Skill to Each Rank						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Informing	1.947	54.7	17.3	16.0	8.0	1.3	0.0	2.7
2	Discussing	2.453	17.3	41.3	26.7	9.3	4.0	1.3	0.0
3	Persuading	3.173	12.0	20.0	20.0	37.3	8.0	2.7	0.0
4	Conversing	3.200	10.7	20.0	28.0	26.7	9.3	5.3	0.0
5	Debating	5.253	1.3	4.0	4.0	9.3	37.3	28.0	16.0
6	Refuting	5.800	2.7	0.0	1.3	6.7	18.7	41.3	29.3
7	Entertaining	6.027	1.3	0.0	4.0	4.0	20.0	21.3	49.3

1--most important; 7--least important

Table 4

Comparison of Rank Orders of Communication Skills Obtained Independently by Crocker and by Wasylic

Crocker		Communication Skills	Wasylic	
Rank Order of Means	Mean		Rank Order of Means	Mean
1	2.347	Listening	1	2.3
2	2.907	Writing	2	2.9
3	3.760	Reading	5	4.9
4	3.867	Group Discussion	4	3.5
5	4.053	Interviewing	5	3.2
6	5.467	Non Verbal Communication	7	5.5
7	5.520	Public Speaking	6	5.1

Spearman Correlation of rank orders 4 = .8036